

CHAMPIONING

How Nomcebo Dlamini is leading the fight against alcohol harm in SA

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FOR Nomcebo Dlamini, advocacy goes beyond raising awareness to influencing the policies and systems that can protect communities from harm.

At 53, Dlamini is the campaign director of the Southern African Alcohol Policy Alliance South Africa (SAAPA-SA), where she leads the national True Cost of Alcohol Campaign, which promotes evidence-based measures to reduce alcohol-related harm. Her work spans substance use policy, public health advocacy, and government engagement, with a particular focus on protecting women, children, and young people.

"Policy should protect people before profits and advocacy must ensure that evidence, community experiences, and human dignity remain at the centre of decision-making," she says.

One of the biggest challenges, she believes, is that the scale of alcohol-related harm is still not fully understood.

"Alcohol is South Africa's number one public health challenge because there is no realisation of the actual impact that alcohol has on our communities."

Alcohol is classified as a Group 1 carcinogen, meaning there is sufficient evidence that it causes cancer. Dlamini says many South Africans do not fully understand this risk and compares alcohol with tobacco and asbestos.

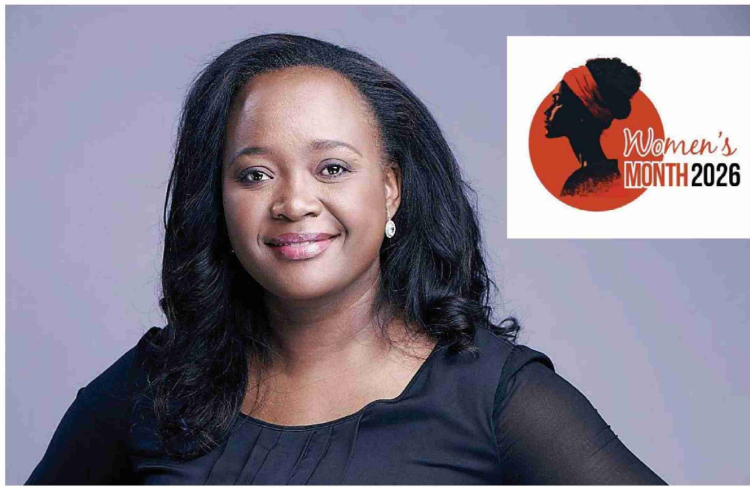
"We do not have an understanding, a full understanding, that it is a Group 1 carcinogen, so it's similar to tobacco and it's similar to asbestos."

She also points to the economic cost of alcohol-related harm, saying between 10% and 12% of South Africa's gross domestic product is spent dealing with its consequences.

"We also do not fully understand the impact that it has on our economy. Like 10 to 12% of our GDP, we are spending on dealing with alcohol harm in our communities, and in our country."

Dlamini says alcohol harm also affects households and communities through gender-based violence (GBV).

"Alcohol literally is an enabler of almost every instance of GBV in our country," she says, adding that in cases of GBV, the perpetrator, the victim, or both may have been drinking.



NOMCEBO Dlamini, a tireless advocate for public health, championing policy reforms to combat alcohol harm and empower communities across South Africa. | SUPPLIED

Dlamini says she is particularly proud of helping to build the True Cost of Alcohol Campaign into a national advocacy movement involving researchers, health-care professionals, civil society organisations, traditional leaders, young people, and communities. "I am most proud of helping to build and lead The True Cost of Alcohol Campaign."

Rather than placing responsibility for alcohol-related harm solely on individuals, the campaign focuses on the policies and systems that influence the availability, affordability, and marketing of alcohol.

Dlamini's approach to advocacy was shaped by her appointment by Parliament to the Central Drug Authority, where she was later elected deputy chairperson. The position allowed her to oversee the implementation of South Africa's National Drug Master Plan and engage directly with government on substance use policy.

"It reinforced my conviction that evidence alone is not enough — effective advocacy is needed to translate research into action."

The experience ultimately led to her becoming Campaign Director at SAAPA-SA, where she focuses on advancing evidence-based alcohol policy and strengthening prevention approaches. One of her biggest professional challenges is bringing different sectors together.

"Addressing alcohol harm requires collaboration between health, social development, education, law enforcement, local government, and many other stakeholders."

She says competing interests, including commercial influence, can make the work difficult, but meaningful policy change requires persistence. That determination was shaped long before her advocacy career began. Born on June 10, 1973, Dlamini was raised in Eswatini by a

Swazi father and a Xhosa mother.

Although the family lived in Eswatini, she and her siblings spent almost every school holiday with their extended family in Soweto, particularly in Orlando East and Zola. Her mother's family had a strong history of political activism, while the family's move to Eswatini was partly shaped by the political realities of apartheid South Africa.

Growing up between Eswatini and South Africa exposed Dlamini to different cultures and gave her an early understanding of inequality, justice, and the importance of ordinary people standing up for change.

She was the youngest child in a large extended family. Her father died when she was six, and her mother raised the family with strength, faith, and compassion. Her mother taught her that every person had a voice worth hearing and encouraged her to speak up, even when her views differed from her own.

One lesson has stayed with Dlamini: people could disagree with her, provided she was standing on the side of what was right.

"That belief has become the foundation of my advocacy work. My mother inspired me to see advocacy not as confrontation, but as a responsibility to stand alongside those whose voices are often ignored."

Although her academic background is in law, Dlamini came to recognise that many of society's greatest injustices are rooted not only in legislation but also in public policy.

She says public health advocacy allows her to address the structural factors that place vulnerable communities at risk. Her work includes strengthening implementation of the World Health Organization (WHO) SAFER Initiative in line with South Africa's National Drug Master Plan and advancing community-based prevention.

Advocacy is demanding work, and Dlamini knows that change rarely happens quickly. Her faith helps keep her grounded. She begins many mornings with prayer walks and draws strength from her family, friends, and colleagues.

Most of all, she says, it is the communities affected by alcohol harm that keep her motivated. "Every family affected by alcohol harm reinforces why we must continue advocating until healthier, safer communities become a reality."

As South Africa marks Women's Month, Dlamini sees the occasion as both a celebration of women's achievements and a reminder of the role women have played in challenging injustice.

She points to the women who marched against the pass laws as an example of the power of collective advocacy and believes that the same spirit is still needed today.

"Whether addressing gender-based violence, alcohol harm, or broader public health challenges, women continue to lead change within families, communities, and public life."

For Dlamini, Women's Month is a call for women to continue shaping policies that protect future generations — and ensuring that the people living with the consequences of those policies have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives.

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